




IN SUMMARY: RT1

NOS's Contribution to NOAA's Role in Executing the U.S. Ocean Action Plan

N JANUARY 27, Dr. Richard Spinrad, NOAA Assistant Administrator for Ocean Services and Coastal Zone Management, met with 20 stakeholders representing the academic and research communities, nongovernmental organizations, recreational users, ports, and other industries. The roundtable was the first in a series of constituent meetings in 2005 on NOS's contribution to NOAA's role in executing the U.S. Ocean Action Plan. Ms. Carli Betrand represented Dr. William Hogarth, NOAA's Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, who was unable to attend. Five NOS officials also joined Dr. Spinrad for the discussion.

OPENING REMARKS

In his opening remarks, Dr. Spinrad highlighted the importance of constituent involvement in NOAA's work and discussed the role of the NOAA Ocean Council in coordinating the agency's response to recommendations made by the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy in a 2004 report. He commented on legislation and appropriations figures approved by the 108th Congress, and noted that the 109th Congress will also address key ocean issues.

Dr. Spinrad then discussed the Administration's response to the USCOP report: The U.S. Ocean Action Plan and the Committee on Ocean Policy, which President Bush established by Executive Order on December 17, 2004. Stressing the need for interagency coordination in ocean affairs, he noted that Cabinet-level participation in the Committee on Ocean Policy should lead to significant benefits. Dr. Spinrad discussed the committee structure and working groups, and emphasized the fact that high-level agency representation will be needed to address budget priorities. Dr. Spinrad noted that it was important to integrate the Committee's work with the federal program planning and budget activities.

Dr. Spinrad went on to discuss several of NOAA's priorities in the U.S. Ocean Action Plan, including the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS) and the Integrated Ocean Observing System (IOOS). He said NOS will be involved in executing a number of actions outlined in the plan, including marine transportation, integrated ocean mapping, coral reef conservation, international ocean policy and science, and other activities noted in the background paper prepared for the meeting. Dr. Spinrad said activities underway in the states and regions are an important focus for NOAA, and highlighted the importance of partnerships with the private sector, academic communities and NGOs.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

Dr. Spinrad opened the roundtable discussions by asking the participants to comment on the U.S. Ocean Action Plan. He also asked the constituents to discuss their priorities for implementation, and to describe related activities within their organizations. As noted below, the roundtable focused on a number of important issues related to the nation's ocean agenda.

Committee on Ocean Policy and U.S. Ocean Action Plan

Although many participants said the Committee on Ocean Policy was a positive first step, a number of them expressed concern that the U.S. Ocean Action Plan did not go far enough in responding to the USCOP report. They said the Cabinet-level



committee would play an important role in creating greater visibility for ocean issues, coordinating federal agency activities, and targeting budget needs. At the same time, some of the participants were disappointed by the fact that the U.S. Ocean Action Plan lacked a clear vision statement, failed to provide new funding for ocean-related activities, and didn't recognize the need to work with Congress to set a national ocean policy agenda.

Several constituents stressed the fact that maintaining the "status quo" is not sufficient to make progress on the nation's ocean agenda. They expressed concern that the U.S. Ocean Action Plan was merely a repackaging of existing initiatives and low-cost actions rather than an effort to move toward real change. Participants noted that the USCOP recommendations should not be seen as a "menu" that the administration can pick from: the recommendations are interdependent and are meant to work in concert to increase the health and sustainability of our oceans and coasts.

Several participants also expressed concern with regard to budget and appropriation issues. They commented that funding for activities in the U.S. Ocean Action Plan is not sufficient, given the priorities identified in the USCOP report and the need for a comprehensive approach to ocean research and management. Participants agreed that the work of the Committee on Ocean Policy should be closely linked to federal budget activities, and that OMB must be involved in this process.

Roundtable participants said NOAA must be more proactive on ocean and coastal issues if it wants to be the international leader in integrated ocean management. They emphasized that although the USA has a tremendous capacity to implement effective management measures, it often takes a crisis or major disaster to overcome political inertia. Several constituents recommended that NOAA "think ahead" and develop a formalized approach to implement ecosystem management at the regional level. They called on NOAA to identify what is needed to implement the USCOP recommendations, including policy initiative and scientific research needed to "fill the gaps," and said such research activities should be client- focused and have management applications.

Enhanced Communication

A number of participants were critical of the fact that stakeholders did not get the opportunity to comment on the Administration's response. Several participants offered that while the USCOP encouraged public involvement, the U.S. Ocean Action Plan was developed with little or no opportunity for constituent input. Several participants said that the Committee on Ocean Policy should develop appropriate mechanisms to enhance communications and engage stakeholders in its work. In this regard, participants recommended a committee newsletter, periodic stakeholder meetings, and Federal Register notices providing information on proposed activities and the opportunity for public comment. The roundtable participants were strongly supportive of NOAA's ongoing efforts to meet with constituents, and they urged NOAA to play a strong role in the committee's work.

The roundtable participants also stressed the need to further engage the public in ocean issues, and urged NOAA to capitalize on the momentum generated by the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy to make progress in the short term. Several constituents recommended that NOAA sponsor an annual Ocean Day, with the same level of visibility as Earth Day, to promote public involvement and further the nation's ocean agenda.

Ocean Observation, Research and Technology

The roundtable participants were generally supportive of NOAA's ocean observation activities, but questioned the level of budget resources for regional observation initiatives. Participants discussed the link between ocean observation and resource management, and urged NOAA to identify user needs and data management requirements. One participant urged NOAA to identify the agency leads for ocean observation activities because a number of NOAA offices play a role in ocean observation efforts, and NOAA constituents do not know who is managing the overall effort.

The roundtable also discussed the role of private industry in developing the Integrated Ocean Observation System (IOOS). Several important points were raised by the participants:

- *Private enterprises are accustomed to making long-range plans and should be engaged early on, not just when requests for proposals (RFPs) are issued*
- *Although industry involvement will be needed to implement IOOS, most large companies don't fully understand NOAA and its constituents*
- *To foster better working relationships and more useful products, contractors need to learn more about NOAA's customers and their needs*
- *To help the business community work with the agency, NOAA should identify "who does what" within the agency, and provide better contact information for agency activities.*

Ecosystem Management and Habitat Restoration

Several participants said that science is 20 years ahead of management activities and suggested that the Committee on Ocean Policy, with its Interagency Working Group on Ocean Resource Management, could play an important role in bridging the gap. They also noted that ocean and coastal research is critical to providing information for decision-making, and will be increasingly important in identifying ecosystem management needs and in supporting regional activities. Several participants also stressed that ecosystem-based management involved "more than fisheries," and called on NOAA to accelerate its activities in this area.

Although Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) were recognized as a useful management tool, some of the stakeholders were concerned that recreational fishermen and boaters could lose access to areas they traditionally use. They mentioned that recreational interests should be represented in the Marine Sanctuary Advisory Committees, and urged NOS to work more closely with the National Marine Fisheries Service on these issues.

The roundtable also discussed the importance of habitat restoration. Several participants noted that although this was a key issue recognized by the Pew Ocean Commission and U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, funding for habitat restoration activities is not readily available. They also urged increased funding for habitat restoration, and related efforts to mitigate pollution and runoff in coastal watersheds. Another participant noted that while coral reefs get significant financial and technical assistance, the restoration of seagrass areas is equally important, and that increased federal coordination and funding are also needed for states to implement the Clean Marina Program and related efforts to address invasive marine species.

Partnerships

Roundtable participants urged NOAA to continue to reach out to potential partners at all levels. They noted the opportunity to work together to promote public awareness of the oceans and to address marine pollution concerns. The participants agreed that ports, marina operators, and the offshore oil and gas industries have important roles to play in addressing marine pollution concerns. Industry, along with the academic and research communities, can also help identify information needs for ocean observation systems. They also agreed that NGOs and recreational boating and fishing organizations have well informed, active members who care deeply about the marine environment, and are interested in working with NOAA to promote public understanding and marine conservation activities.